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Personally, I've had various opportunities to make observations about the educational system and its drawbacks from two different angles during most of the last decade: first as a (disabled) pupil completing his secondary education and later on as a university student of cultural studies with an interest in the generation and dissemination of knowledge.

My experiences and reflections led me to believe that on its way towards an internationalised, pluralistic and self-confident European future, the educational system will inevitably have to face a shift of paradigms to meet both the needs of individuals seeking orientation and those of a thoroughly modernised economy and society. I am convinced that with in this new frame of mind to emerge:

- *learners* will have to be respected as reasonable, self-governing personalities from various backgrounds that need assistance to grow and adapt themselves to an increasing range of situations  
*as opposed to:* individuals that are placed within a certain framework and receive their education according to the place they have been assigned on the basis of a mostly inflexible curriculum shaped by cultural preconceptions;
- whereas *knowledge* should be regarded as a complex, alterable entity comprising various types of assertions, hypotheses, claims, and cultural judgements that can never be completely at the disposal of any one individual, but should nevertheless constantly enable responsible personalities to cope with their lives.  
*as opposed to:* a static, readily accessible entity, to be easily evaluated, quantified and distributed according to age and ability, accepting that some will receive little more than a notion of 'basic knowledge' grants them

Opening up the educational system to dialog and an ever-changing environment in an honest and permanent way would, I expect, greatly improve the quality of education, enabling schools to cope with cultural diversity and the varying requirements of justice (↗Q4) and allowing them to mature into real communities (↗ Q6 and Q8).

As long as pupils are thought in allegedly heterogeneous groups according to a rough estimation on their capacities, according to a more or less static authoritative curriculum, there is little room for diversity.

Pupils have to learn their lectures following exclusively the course that has been designed for them. They have to accept their teacher's view even if it seems to be at odds with what they know about the world. This conflict, which may well be rooted in a difference of cultural perspectives, cannot be resolved, as there is virtually no platform for open dialogue. The community cannot capitalise on this discrepancy, either, because it hardly comes to be discussed.

In the end, the 'dissident' pupil will at best ignore the matter, or, in the worst case, adopt a destructive attitude.

Moreover, much depends on the teachers opinion, which is necessarily partial and dependant on cultural suppositions. Not only does (s)he have to assign the pupils to their respective 'ability group' at some point of their lives, (s)he will also have to pose regular exams, thereby establishing a certain view as ultimately correct – at least implicitly in the minds of a great many pupils.

In view of the issues raised in this consultation, this is unacceptable. Both knowledge and the role of pupils and teachers are thus conceived as static factors, rather than dynamic elements of a social process.

If, however, the system allowed for more heterogeneous groups and a schedule that enabled pupils to integrate their individual needs into the daily routine, it would embrace cultural diversity and increased equality among learners, while fostering the pupils' sense of responsibility at the same time.

In such a reformed system, which should provide for small, flexible classes and more time per subject, disagreements on the subject matter or (social) conflicts within the group might be dealt with more openly in a lesson conducted by the teacher, or, alternatively, in a special period succeeding it as a regular part of the curriculum.

In this manner, differences between pupils may be addressed and appreciated instead of neutralised and neglected.

In the best possible case, even the teacher might profit from the wealth of experiences brought to him by the class. As a consequence, he would admittedly lose his authority as *the only one* in possession of knowledge, but nevertheless be appreciated (or even revered) for the knowledge he is able to offer due to his *qualification* and his wider *perspective* of things.

A more flexible, sensitive way to disseminate knowledge would also mobilise the social energy and potentials of most pupils, who could use the time they do not have to spend on exercises that are useless in their special case either to initiate projects for and with the school community or to do some private research to further their education.

Judging mainly by my experience with learning processes, I expect that the courage to 'open a platform' on behalf of educators by reducing pressure and speed would yield multiple positive effects:

- It would emancipate the pupils and encourage them to take an active role in community life, as they would be able to observe what they can achieve together and how best to do this. (↗Q6 and Q8)

- It would teach them to appreciate their individual positions in life and their abilities, increasing their sensibilities for diversity (↗Q4)

In order to achieve this, a *teacher's training* needs to develop such social skills as required to deal with creative processes in groups, as well as adequate studies on his subject matter. These ought to teach him (or her) not only a set of scientific assertions, but also *how* they were obtained (experiments, discourses etc.) and *why* they are valid.

In this way, (s)he will be well be able to enter into discussions with his students in order to resolve their doubts and conflicts as far as possible. In this respect, it may be necessary to allow for different academic careers in the case of teachers, even if this possibly prologues their stay at university.

Although this argument tends to emphasise so-called 'soft skills', it does by no means disregard disciplines in which a certain stock of knowledge needs to be transported (or reproduced). – To do so would be to neglect the requirements of a modernised society.

However, even in the domain of the 'exact sciences', for instance, a less authority-centred mode of teaching can be of use.

First of all, it will be easier for pupils to recognise and compensate their learning deficits in a more open atmosphere, so that social discrimination will eventually be reduced. Furthermore, they can be incited to ask questions and explore the sources of scientific knowledge in appropriate experiments, which will enable them to form a clearer opinion on how to make good use of both, scientific knowledge and technology. This undoubtedly is a major issue for the evolution of humane societies in a future Europe.

Furthermore, it should be taken into account that there is no impermeable border between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, especially as far as 'general education' is concerned. A more open way of teaching lessons allows to address such conflicts as may occur in connection with the lessons learned in a biology or physics class (p. ex. concerning cosmology, evolution, genetics, sexual relationships, disabilities, human rights and responsibilities among many others).

In either case, the resulting 'education' administered to young people will be of a higher quality. – As far as history or political education is concerned, it obvious how an altered framework might open the classrooms to pluralism and an increased historical awareness. Basic lessons of democracy could then be learned even in the normal course of affairs within the school community.

It is true that these proposals require serious changes and may occasion that some relevant subject matters presently taught at European schools will not necessarily be

learned their any more by a number of pupils. – Since, however, the range and heterogeneity of human knowledge continues to increase beyond measure, and pluralism must no longer be barred from the classrooms in a multicultural Europe (where pupils voice increasingly varying demands), I am of the opinion that unhesitant steps must nevertheless be taken in this direction.

Not least controversial debates in the press about what should be taught at schools – including demands for both, more *and* less scientific / religious / artistic / regional education etc. all at once – illustrate how the concept of a truly ‘general’ education is increasingly difficult to grasp once knowledge is seen as part of a culture aspiring pluralism. That the heterogeneity of the pupils’ cultural backgrounds increases can be observed at the time of writing even.

For all these reasons, I propose that the European Community should seek to

- Establish a widely accepted **framework of tests and certificates** to be taken at **flexible points of time**. These should each certify qualifications in certain areas of knowledge, covering a specific logical unit, such as: “working with journalistic texts”, “calculating with fractions”, “knowledge of certain species”, “basic chemical processes” etc. In this manner, it would be less urgent to hold constant examinations that bind pupils and teachers and impede discursive teaching. Likewise, it would be easier to compare qualifications.
- Assist in the preparation of **educational materials** to facilitate open teaching. These could help to form a common identity. Distribution may be facilitated by Internet technologies
- Incite member states to accept **schools with different pedagogical** concepts and make them accessible not only to economic elites but to the general public. This might foster the creative process of change in the system and is certain to give pupils and parents an audible voice (and the ability to choose) in education.  
and on a more abstract level
- Incite regional authorities to **recognise the need** for a reformed, more flexible system
- **Assist in the reform** of curricula and educational structures.
- **Reinforce the steps** the member states take towards a more open-minded pedagogy, if necessary by allowing for financial advantages or grants.

Irrespective of differences of opinion, this is a serious issue. If the educational system fails to respond to an ever more variable social and natural environment, it will increasingly fail to meet its social responsibilities and frustrate the justified needs and expectations of countless young people.